

Memorandum

Date: June 7, 2011
To: The State's School and Library Communities
From: Tony Evers, State Superintendent
Subject: Joint Finance Committee Action Impacting the UW and Internet Access for Our Schools and Libraries

I am extremely concerned and alarmed by the telecommunications provisions which passed the Joint Finance Committee Friday night and their impact on Wisconsin's public libraries, public and private schools, the university system, technical colleges, and WiscNet. These provisions will have a devastating impact on the University of Wisconsin System campuses and our schools and public libraries. This language was introduced very late in the legislative process and there was no time for any public review, comments or feedback from those impacted by these provisions.

From the UW perspective, this will require it to return the \$39 million in broadband grants to the federal government. In addition, it will prohibit any UW campus from participating in advanced research networks linking research institutions worldwide. You cannot have a renowned research institution, like the UW-Madison, without having access to such networks.

From the public and private school and library perspective, seventy-five percent of our public schools and ninety-five percent of our public libraries get Internet access via WiscNet - a not-for-profit network service under the auspices of the UW-Madison. The provision in this legislation will very likely make it impossible for WiscNet to continue offering Internet access. If our schools and libraries must use other Internet providers most will pay at least 2-3 times more than what WiscNet now charges. Furthermore, other Internet providers base their charges on how much bandwidth a school or library has - the higher the bandwidth, the higher the Internet costs. WiscNet's funding formula is not based on bandwidth. Thus as schools and libraries continue to increase their bandwidth, their WiscNet costs remain the same. With our schools and libraries facing substantial budget reductions, how can anyone justify making them pay more for less service?

It is very important to note that WiscNet provides much more than just Internet access. It offers a very successful networking service connecting higher education institutions, K-12 schools and libraries. For example, WiscNet hosts online tutorials, access to online learning resources and other services specifically targeted at our schools and libraries. These are services a commercial Internet provider will be unlikely to offer. This legislation will end over fifteen years of fostering a cooperative and collaborative association between higher education institutions, PK-12 schools and libraries. We need to continue fostering such associations, not eliminating them.

There are some sources that say WiscNet is competing with the state's BadgerNet network. But BadgerNet is a broadband network and it does not provide Internet service. The state Department of Administration has authorized several Internet providers, including WiscNet and some private sector providers, to offer Internet service over the BadgerNet network. Many of our school and libraries use BadgerNet for their broadband circuit and then use WiscNet as their Internet provider. And some sources claim that WiscNet provides telecommunication services but it is an Internet provider, not a telephone company.

Another issue being discussed is that as a not-for-profit entity, WiscNet has some type of advantage over the private sector. But BadgerNet - which is provided by private sector telecommunication carriers under state contract - is itself "affordable" to most schools and libraries only because it is heavily subsidized (\$16.8 million annually) by state funds. To be clear, DPI supports the BadgerNet subsidy. But this subsidy is limited and as schools and libraries need more bandwidth not supported by the subsidy, they often look for other options besides BadgerNet.

On the issue of advanced networking and affordability, I would be remiss if I did not mention that the telecommunication carriers fully supported a decision by the current administration to return \$23 million in federal funding. This was a decision that cost Wisconsin a great opportunity to provide fiber broadband connections to all the school districts and libraries, especially in rural areas, on BadgerNet. This action, and Friday's action, taken together represent a lost opportunity and \$62 million in lost federal competitive grants.

In conclusion, we all know the critical importance of having access to high-speed, affordable Internet access to educating our children and providing online information resources to the public via our libraries. As Wisconsin competes in the global economy we need to make absolutely certain that our schools and libraries have such access, especially in rural areas. WiscNet now provides this access, and much more, at very affordable costs. But its ability to continue its very successful services will likely be made impossible with this legislation. I ask your support to help ensure that the UW has access to research networks and that our schools and libraries have the local control to select WiscNet or any other Internet provider. More background information on this issue is on the WiscNet website at <http://www.wiscnet.net>.

If the above issues are of concern, contact your state representative and state senator soon because action by the legislature is likely within the next several days.